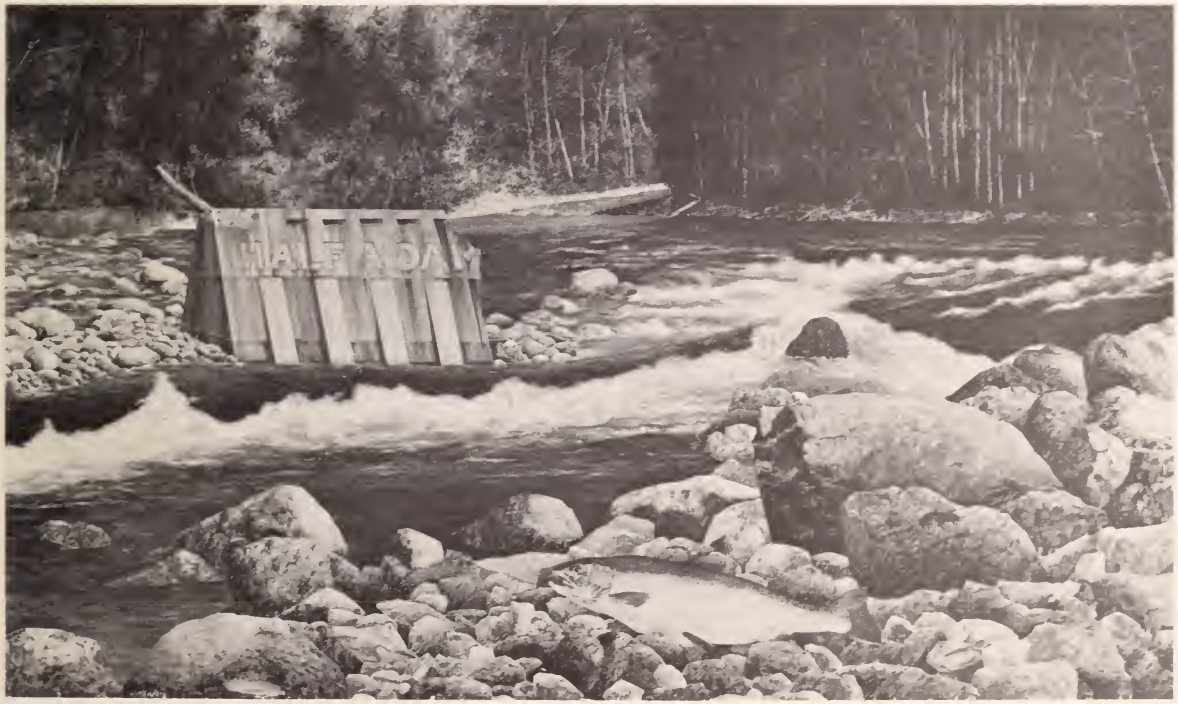
William Allan



"I don't want to know anything for sure."
—William Allan

The first time I visited Bill Allan's studio in Mill Valley, California, I was puzzled by some watercolors of round, brown lumps on a white ground, which he had tacked to his wall. When I asked him what they were, he explained that he had been reading a farm story to his young children, who asked him why there were no "cow-pies" in the book's illustrations. Disconcerted by his inability to answer the question logically, Allan spent the rest of the night adding meticulous watercolor renderings of animal droppings to the book. The next morning, his kids found it magically transformed; the drawings I saw were Allan's initial studies for the additions.

For me, the spirit of this incident, although it took place many years ago, is still at the heart of his work. Bill Allan injects magic into the familar, the known, the ordinary aspects and images of life. Preferring to describe his occupation by the word "poet," rather than "artist," he is less interested in making something entirely new than he is in changing what is already there.

Allan has always lived and worked on the West Coast, and the relaxed noncompetitive style of California life is very much a part of his attitude toward making art. His close friends—among them Joseph Raffael, Bob Hudson, Bill Wiley, Bruce Nauman – have shared ideas and activities, and occasionally made pieces or films together. Allan is a romantic for whom formal "problem-solving," the social rigors of the art world, and even public exposure of his work are of little or no interest. The images in his work come from stories, from his childhood, from dreams ("an attempt to put order into my life for the last ten years"), from fishing—which along with painting is his major obsession—from his family, from all the details of daily life. He says that he gets the same information from other kinds of things as he does from art. "Most of the paintings," he explains, "are about the paradox of information, and about which way the information is coming from."

The information in Allan's paintings, which sometimes take up to a year to complete, takes the form of parables—"unlike my life, but just as real as anything else." They are about how one learns to love, how one fears or reacts, how one participates, "things that one understands as a poet, but which aren't logical."

For instance: *Shadow Repair for the Western Man* is an exquisitely intricate, magnificently crafted painting of an empty, standing pair of bluejeans and a pair of workboots, both overlooking a majestic snow-capped mountain range which leaves one awed by its beauty. The notion of repairing things, which fascinated Allan to the point of organizing the San Francisco "Repair Show" in 1969 (to which an enormous number of artists contributed works), is a theme which is at once physical, psychological, structural, metaphorical. It is also, in this painting, a personal allegory for the artist. Partly, it is about a friend who revealed to Allan "my other, more delicate side, something that allowed me to accept my provincialism, being a Western man." The painting, Allan says, also reflects "the images we all have of ourselves that are being held up by shaky props. We don't want to love all that, but it's preposterous to tear it down. Even if it's shaky, it should be a monument." There is a bizarre, rather surreal juxtaposition of human artifacts and natural phenomena in the painting. The human element is vulnerable, while the mountains are cold and remote. "Nature is where you go to get the shit scared out of you," he says. "The mountains are bigger than any comprehension we can have about them. I made them cold, to be about respect."

Allan describes his painting in much the same metaphysical way he describes fishing. Although he acknowledges a vast difference between the two activities, he does not consider one more important than the other. In *Half a Dam,* the concrete form (once actually built by himself and Bruce Nauman) is a reference to the idiocy of "giving half a damn." A salmon on the foreground rocks is dying after spawning, a natural part of its life span, but an image known only to those who walk rivers, and

thus to those who also destroy them.

Tentative Assault on Mt. Fear, according to Allan, is about "how to behave," something he assumes that everybody thinks about and which he himself has always been trying to learn. The jackknife in the sky is "for protection, something you send out ahead of you. Before you're ready to climb the mountain, you make a few tries, to get over the dangerous part of it. This painting is about the killer part and the beautiful place, both of which are mixed up. I've thought about how I could justify all the fish I've killed in my life, and also about the fact that I've used the fish as a weapon more than I've used the knife. Most hunters are usually killers, but they're the only people who know what's out there. This is a painting about how to tap the killers, to make them poets."

Included in this exhibition is a group of watercolors which, as much as anything else he's done, indicate clearly the nature of his thinking and his transformations; they are pictures, or rather portraits, of fish parts, mostly heads. They are accompanied by some simple stories Allan wrote, in which mundane images become illuminating metaphors. Like the rest of Bill Allan's work, these drawings tell us a great deal about our own nature and our responses. Employing familiar things in unfamiliar contexts, his art is funny, absurdly touching, sometimes tragic and always unforgettable.

Marcia Tucker
Curator

Biography

1936	Born in Everett, Washington, March 28.
1958	Received B.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute.
1965-67	Taught at the University of California, Davis.
1967-69	Taught at the San Francisco Art Institute.
1969	Taught at the University of California, Berkeley.
1968-present	Teaching at Sacramento State College, California.
1972	Awarded National Endowment for the Arts Grant.

One-Man Shows

1964-65	Scott Galleries, Seattle, Washington.
1968	Berkeley Gallery, San Francisco.
1970	SECA Grant Exhibition, San Francisco Museum of Art.
1971	Reese Paley Gallery, San Francisco.
1973	Hansen Fuller Gallery, San Francisco.

Selected Group Shows

1956, '57, '58	"San Francisco Art Association Annual," San Francisco Museum of Art.
1957	"Carnegie International Exhibition," Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.
	"Second Invitational Biennial," Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California.
	"Annual Exhibition," Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.
1957, '58	"Washington State Art Association Annual," Seattle Museum of Art, Washington.
1958	"Art USA," Madison Square Garden, New York.
1965	"2D-3D," Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California.
	"Slant Step Show," Berkeley Gallery, San Francisco.
1966	"New Realism," Los Angeles County Museum of Art Rental Gallery.
1967	"Funk," University Art Museum, Berkeley.
1968	"Drawing Invitational," San Francisco Art Institute.
	"Pacific Northwest Film Festival," Bellevue, Washington.
	"Cinethon," Festival of North American New Cinema, Toronto, Canada.
	Invitational Exhibition, Reed College, Portland, Oregon.
1969	"1969 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
	"Repair Show," Berkeley Gallery, San Francisco.
1970	"Looking West," Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.
1971	"Continuing Surrealism," La Jolla Museum of Art, California.
	Harry W. Anderson Collection, Stanford Museum, California.
1972	"Seventieth American Exhibition," The Art Institute of Chicago.
	"The State of California Painting," organized by Michael Walls for Govett-Brewster

Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, and tour.
"California Works on Paper 1950-1971," University Art Museum, Berkeley.
"1972 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
"Sacramento Sampler I," E. B. Crocker Art Gallery, Sacramento, California, and the Oakland Museum of Art, California.
"California Artists," Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

1973 "1973 Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Art," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
"San Francisco Printmakers," Cincinnati Art Museum.
"American Drawings 1963-1973," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Films

"The Asian Carp," 3 minutes, 16mm, color, sound. 'The Awful Backlash," 16 minutes, 16mm, black and white, sound. "War is Hell," 29 minutes, 16mm, black and white, sound. "Span," 12 minutes, 16mm, color, silent.

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width. Watercolors are on paper. All works are lent by Galleria Odyssia, New York, unless otherwise listed.

PAINTINGS

1. *Shadow Repair for the Western Man.* 1970. Oil on canvas. 90 x 114. Lent by the University Art Museum, Berkeley, California; purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.
2. *Half a Dam.* 1971. Acrylic on canvas. 79 x 113. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson, Atherton, California.
3. *Tentative Assault on Mt. Fear.* 1971. Acrylic on canvas. 74 x 111½. Lent by Richard Reisman, San Francisco.
4. *The Transient Poet.* 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 84½ x 126.
5. *Prince Fire.* 1972. Acrylic on canvas. 65½ x 89.
6. *Deception Pass.* 1973. Acrylic on canvas. 93 x 77. Lent by Hansen Fuller Gallery, San Francisco.
7. *Traveling in Strange Circles.* 1973. Acrylic on canvas. 74 x 88. Lent by the San Francisco Museum; Gift of the Women's Board.

WATERCOLORS

8. *Salmon Head.* 1971. 17 x 21 1/16.
9. *Trout Head.* 1971. 15 x 20½.
10. *Muir Creek—Fresh Silver Salmon.* 1972. 24 x 29½.
11. *Muir Creek—Silver Salmon.* 1972. 24 x 30.
12. *Muir Creek—Spawned Silver Salmon.* 1972. 24 x 30.
13. *Muir Creek—Spawning Steelhead.* 1972. 24 x 30.
14. *Muir Creek—Winter Kill Young Steelhead.* 1972. 24 x 29¾.
15. *Muir Creek—Young Steelhead.* 1972. 24 x 29.
16. *Silver Salmon—Paper Mill Creek.* 1972. 24 x 29.
17. *Steep Ravine—Rainbow Trout.* 1972. 24 x 29.
18. Untitled. 1972. 19 x 26 15/16.
19. Untitled. 1972. 19 x 26 15/16.
20. Untitled. 1973. 24 1/16 x 38¼.

January 17–February 17, 1974

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New York, New York 10021
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Cover: *Half a Dam.* 1971. Acrylic on canvas. 79 x 113". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson, Atherton, California.